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ABSTRACT

Texas ranks among the top 10 states for school dropouts with an annual dropout rate of about 30%. Some dropout prevention programs are incorporating community service components as a means to counter the alienation and low self-esteem frequently seen among dropouts and at-risk students. Significant adults other than school personnel provide youth with linkages to a community's heritage and culture. The Youth Exchanging with Seniors Project (YES) is a pilot project designed to link youth with rural elderly through community-based service programs in 20 West Texas counties. With few human services available in this sparsely populated area, innovative grass-roots projects must be initiated to address the long-term care needs of aging frail elders. The group of age 60 and over comprises 15-23% of the population in 16 of these counties. YES proposes to organize members of 4-H and Future Homemakers of America. The project will provide the elderly with services such as housekeeping, yard and garden maintenance, minor home repair, grocery shopping, errands, and pet care. Participation in the project will give youth the opportunities to develop a better sense of self, meaningful social and community awareness, and positive attitudes toward the elderly. Project services also will help the frail elderly to maintain an independent living style. As a result, the YES project may provide a model for linking at-risk youth with significant adults through community service. (SV)

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YOUTH EXCHANGING WITH SENIORS
Service+Education+Commitment: Preventing Rural School Dropouts

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YOUTH EXCHANGING WITH SENIORS
Service + Education + Commitment: Preventing Rural School Dropouts

Educators across the nation are concerned with the rising number of school dropouts in America now estimated to be 25% per year. Texas ranks among the top ten states for school dropouts with an annual rate of approximately 30%. The largest concentration of students who leave Texas schools are in the 9th grade. Forty-two percent of dropouts are Anglo, 39% Hispanic, 17% Black, 2% Asian, and .2% American Indian. Hispanic students tend to drop out of school earlier than Anglo students. Blacks drop out equally according to grade level (1987-1988 Texas Public School Dropout Report).

Common characteristics of students who leave school or who are at-risk of dropping out of school are low self-esteem, lack personal responsibility, lack of commitment to social values, and an inability to pursue goals (Rowley, 1989). Oftentimes, students see little connection between what they are learning in school and its application in the real world. Added to feelings of alienation and lack of support from family members or school personnel, at-risk students are left without purpose for remaining in school.

Dropout intervention programs typically include support groups, self-esteem improvement, counseling, and personal contact with school personnel along with basic skills and job training. Additionally, many programs for at-risk students have successfully incorporated community service components. Service

activities are one way to connect youth to the well-being of their communities and the people who live there.

Significant adults provide linkages to a community's heritage and culture. Through relationships with adults other than school personnel, youth are exposed to information, experiences, and dimensions of life which may be missing from their own. Service projects enable youth to contribute to the lives of others in such a way that prevents feelings of alienation from society. Calabrese and Schumer (1986) report that students who participated in small groups that planned service projects had significantly lower levels of alienation, isolation, and discipline problems due in part to the chance for responsibility and positive interaction with significant adults.

The Early Adolescent Helper Program in New York City targets academically-alienated, inner-city youth for volunteer work in day care centers, Head Start programs, latchkey programs and senior citizen centers (Schine, 1989). The program is coordinated through schools and includes training and weekly support groups which provide teens opportunities to process their experiences. Pre-employment exploration is one component of this program which seeks to fill students' after-school hours with productive activities that will enable adolescents to discover and develop their interests, talents, skills and values. Benefits to teen volunteers include the ability to define goals, sharpen skills, and broaden horizons.

Magic Me, founded in 1980 in Baltimore, Maryland, is another

youth service program dedicated to improving the self-esteem of unmotivated teen-agers by involving them in community service for the elderly. Through work in nursing homes, at-risk youth learn of their ability to impact others in a positive way. The result is increased self-esteem, confidence and interest in academic skills in order to better serve their senior partners. Community service enables at-risk students to realize that they matter and can make a difference for someone else.

The Youth Exchanging with Seniors Project (Y.E.S. Project) is a pilot project designed to initiate voluntary, community-based service programs linking youth with rural elderly in a 20-county area of West Texas. This interagency initiative is co-sponsored by faculty/staff members of the Texas Tech University Health Sciences Center School of Medicine, the Texas Tech University College of Home Economics, and the Texas Agricultural Extension Service, Lubbock, Texas. The project is funded, in part, by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, one of the largest health care philanthropies in the United States.

Medical manpower and health facility shortages are major problems in this agriculturally-based and sparsely populated 20 county/18,000 square mile region of rural West Texas. Three counties have no hospital; eight counties have one small 50-bed-or-less licensed facility; two counties have no patient care physician; two counties have no nursing home; eight counties have fewer than 100 licensed nursing home beds; three counties are without a practicing dentist; and one county has no pharmacist.

To respond to the dilemmas that imperil the human services delivery system in rural Texas, innovative grass-roots human service projects must be initiated to address the comprehensive long-term care needs of aging frail elders. The rural elderly account for 13 percent of the total population of 450,000 people in the 20-county service area, while the 60-plus group compromised 15-23 percent of the population in 16 of the 20 counties targeted for the Y.E.S. Project (see Table 1). Community-based programs, which partner the resources, talents, and energies of the youth and elders in rural settings offer a potential solution for enhancing the long-term economic and health status for all.

The goal of the Y.E.S. Project is to provide 4-H and Future Homemakers of America (FHA) youth organization members and their advisors with the aging information and implementation strategies necessary to initiate a network of reliable human service providers in rural West Texas. Proposed services to be offered to the elderly through the Y.E.S. Project include housekeeping services, yard/garden services, minor auto maintenance services, minor home repair, and personal services such a grocery shopping, errands, friendly visiting, and pet care. These services are designed to supplement and complement the health and social programs presently available to or used by rural seniors. Training materials have been developed by project personnel and will be pilot tested by teachers, agents, and youth in three phases: Spring 1991, Summer 1991, and Fall 1991.

Future Homemakers of America (FHA) and 4-H clubs have been identified as natural sources for Y.E.S. Project youth service providers. In the 20 county West Texas Y.E.S. Project region, there are 10,199 members of 4-H and 1,837 FHA members. Each organization is service-oriented and enjoys a long and rich heritage in their dedication to the development of rural youth as involved and responsible community members and leaders. In their mission statements, both 4-H and FHA stress the advancement of personal growth, vocational self-help, community involvement, intergenerational understanding, and life skills attainment. Both groups have earned the respect and acceptance of their rural elders, many of whom have spent years of personal involvement with these groups.

As a community-based intergenerational project, Y.E.S. offers many mutually beneficial outcomes for youth and elderly in rural settings. Participation in the Y.E.S. Project provides youth the opportunity to develop a better sense of self, to establish meaningful social awareness and appreciation of cultural/historical community values, and to develop realistic and positive attitudes toward aging. Y.E.S. Project services will help the frail elderly to maintain their independent living environments in a manner that insures and preserves their sense of dignity and general well-being.

Upon completion of the pilot project in the 20 county area, the Y.E.S. Project will be submitted to the Texas Education Agency, Vocational Home Economics Education Division, for

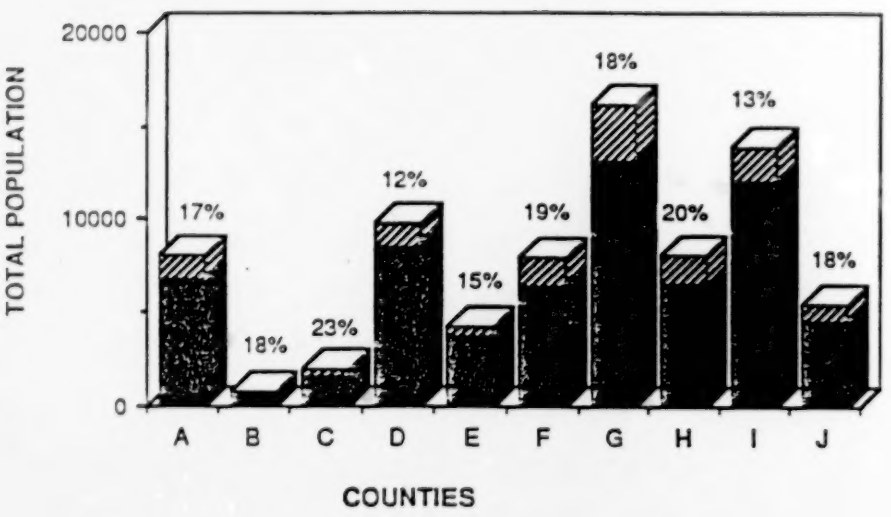
adoption by the 42,000 members of the Texas Future Homemakers of America. Because each of the 254 counties in Texas is served by an agricultural Extension agent and a home economics Extension agent, the channel to disseminate the pilot project to Texas' 280,000 4-H members is in place. Successful completion of the pilot project in the West Texas area is vital to subsequent adoption at the state and national levels for each student organization.

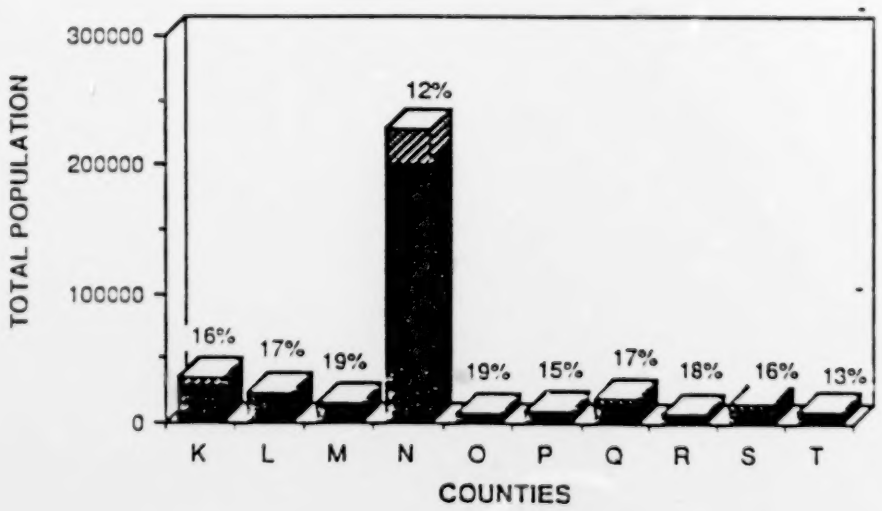
As a result, Y.E.S. could serve as the catalyst for promoting similar initiatives which capitalize on the energies of youth and promote health and welfare partnerships between the young and the old in the rural community. Though not specifically designed as a dropout prevention program, the Y.E.S. Project provides a model for linking at-risk youth with significant adults through community service.

The Y.E.S. Project has the potential for ensuring the "age is a matter of living, not years" by addressing and responding to the varied and overlapping needs that affect the well-being of rural youth and elders in West Texas and nationwide. Moreover, the Y.E.S. Project unites youth and their leaders in an exciting and mutually rewarding human service project for responding to Margaret Mead's challenge when she said, "We must create new models for adults who can teach their children not what to learn, but how to learn; not what they should be committed to, but the value of commitment."

Table 1.

Y.E.S. Project Senior Population By County





PERCENTAGE POPULATION OVER 60

A = BAILEY
B = BORDEN
C = BRISCOE
D = CASTRO
E = COCHRAN
F = CROSBY
G = DAWSON
H = FLOYD
I = GAINES
J = GARZA
K = HALE
L = HOCKLEY
M = LAMB
N = LUBBOCK
O = LYNN
P = PARMER
Q = SCURRY
R = SWISHER
S = TERRY
T = YOAKUM

Data from U.S. Census Bureau, 1986.

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